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# Journeys and Destinations

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## **Journeys and Destinations**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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### **Artist Statement**

My work includes both painting and mixed media approaches. My paintings portray the conflict and discrepancies between Eastern and Western cultures. Each painting emphasizes the Western fascination with body image, fashion, and status symbols. In contrast, they also contain intricate details influenced by the patterns of Eastern fabrics and rug designs, as well as images of Buddha. I reflect on the things that each culture finds important or valuable.

In my mixed media work, I employ techniques that combine transfer, collage, and painting. My materials include photographs, newspapers, magazines, tissue paper, and text from books. The inspirations are photographs from my travels to Italy. I am intrigued by Italian architectural elements within Italian Renaissance paintings. I manipulate my photographs on the computer and include them in my final collages and paintings. I find the contrast between painting, collage, and transfer a successful way to contemporize the view of these antiquated structures.

# **Journeys and Destinations**

## **Introduction**

Like most important events in my life, my path to becoming a teacher was not always the most direct. Instead, it was filled with detours and life lessons which included failures as well as accomplishments, all of which contributed to me becoming a better teacher. Soon after I began my teaching career, I was introduced to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). In VCU's MIS-IAR Program, I immediately began taking painting classes each semester. I was overjoyed to be with other art teachers creating art. This enthusiasm was soon passed on to my students in the form of new techniques and ideas. I soon decided to apply to the program and pursue my degree.

I taught art at the elementary school level in the public school system for five years. For the last ten years, I have taught both elementary and middle school students in a small private school. When I decided to make the change from public school to private school, I discovered what was missing in the public school systems was a failure to put value on a fine arts education. I then focused on the significance of this in my classroom. I had the freedom to write a curriculum for kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade which included a great deal of art history and studio work. I was also able to take students on field trips to museums in Washington, DC and Richmond, Virginia as often as I felt necessary. Included in these trips were also yearly visits to the Buddhist Wat Lao Buddhavong Temple in Catlett, Virginia. I was even fortunate enough to take students to Spain and Italy. It was incredible to see the students' faces as they looked up to observe the Sistine Chapel ceiling that they had recreated in their art room in Orange, Virginia.

All of these experiences with students have influenced and inspired my own art work.

The subject matter for my paintings in the MIS-IAR Program was initially inspired by the art in the Buddhist temple. My trips to Italy would become inspirations for my mixed media work.

## **Aesthetics**

I was raised in a Catholic household and consequently spent a great deal of my childhood in church. I look back with fond memories of this time, observing the opulence and beauty of my surroundings. I was particularly drawn to the ornate decorations on the altar and the stunning stained glass windows. Before I learned how to read, I understood how these windows were the narrative for the life of Christ. This was my first introduction to symbolic narrative. Later, while visiting Assisi, Italy I viewed the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, and as both a Catholic and an artist, I read his life story in the frescoes.

As I listened to our guide teach us about the life of St. Francis, I began to realize the similarities between his life and the life of Buddha. Both were born to wealthy families and led comfortable lives. However, both also realized that wealth and luxury did not guarantee happiness. They both gave up their belongings and lived the remaining years of their lives teaching others the key to a fulfilling life. Their philosophy was generally based on the belief that only by being tolerant of others and aware of your own thoughts and actions, true happiness could be achieved. As I viewed Giotto di Bondone's (1266-1337) frescoes lining the walls of the upper and lower basilicas in Assisi, I remembered standing in Wat Lao Buddhavong viewing similar pictures of Buddha's life. This is where the inspiration for my paintings began. I made the connection between the similarities and differences of these two cultures.

My oil paintings contain a variety of iconic images, both Western and Eastern in origin, that contrast the historical and contemporary values of these diverse cultures. I developed my

compositional designs to be ambiguous in orientation, the top or bottom of the image is decided after the piece is completed. My compositions often appeared cluttered and complex, with shallow depth. They are crowded with visual information which resembled the interior of the Buddhist temple, layers of images without room to breathe. I chose to use this format to encourage the viewer to study the image, and find the details and juxtaposition of images. I also wanted to give the viewer the impression of disharmony which is reflected in the combination of Eastern and Western images.

The fundamentals of Buddhism are a set of principles known as the *Noble Truths*, which are based on suffering. The Buddha teaches us that we can learn by living a good life, and from what we have suffered through during our lives. In my paintings, I referenced this concept by including images of Buddha, the lotus flower, and temples all of which represent peace and serenity. I used the complex designs of Oriental rugs as a background, just as they are ever present in the Buddhist temple. For me, the interwoven fibers and complex designs represented the interweaving and complexities of the two cultures that I contrasted in my paintings.

Along with these references to Buddhism, I depicted contrasting aspects of the West, such as thin and beautiful women and their brand name status symbols. In our contemporary Western culture we tend to put value on acquisitions of objects and monetary wealth. By juxtaposing these Eastern and Western images, I want to illustrate this contrast in values.

To prepare for my paintings, I began by creating collages from my own photographs or from magazines. These collages act as a plan for my paintings. A palette of bright and rich colors, such as vibrant oranges, cobalt blue, and red (the color of a rich mahogany wood), covered my canvases. I used this palette, inspired by the Buddhist Temple, to characterize the intensity of the surroundings.

As a counterpoint to my paintings, the emphasis in my mixed media work is primarily Italian Renaissance architecture. Many important aspects of our society's roots can be traced to the Italian Renaissance, from our religious traditions and customs to art and architecture. I was inspired by the buildings in Italy that have withstood the test of time, as well as the architecture depicted within their fine arts. I remember walking up the stairs in San Marco convent in Florence, Italy and viewing Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (1438-1445) at the top of the stairs. He used columns as a compositional device in this fresco. Many Italian Renaissance paintings contain architectural elements and were even enveloped by architecturally inspired frames. The architectural elements that I chose to use were aesthetically pleasing to me due to their design and harmonious form.

To create my mixed media collages, I used a variety of tools on the computer to manipulate architectural photographs. I focused on intensifying and contrasting the color within the images, as well as converting some images to black and white. I transferred these photographs of architecture and architectural elements onto a variety of surfaces (canvas, paper, and board). Then, I added and overlapped segments of newspaper, textual memorabilia, and tissue paper. When transferring, I purposely left out sections of the images so I could add the missing elements using acrylic paint. I chose to incorporate text and tissue paper to add texture to my work. The goal with my mixed media work was to achieve a balanced combination of transfer techniques, texture, and painting in a single piece.

Looking back at my paintings and mixed media work I see how distinctly different they are, from the depicted imagery to the color palettes. The different approaches and techniques have been part of my journey as an artist. At the beginning of the MIS-IAR Program, I struggled to find subject matter for my artwork and tended to include images based on their aesthetic



qualities. In my current work, I have combined the techniques of painting and transfer with the subject matter. From the inception of new ideas to the completed work on canvas, my work now has more meaning to me. It focuses more on the unique similarities of Catholicism and Buddhism, both in theory and visual representation, and on the qualities of architectural elements.

## **Influences**

In addition to the inspiration of Buddhism and Italian architecture, I have also been influenced by a variety of artists. These influences have shaped the way I use color and present my subject matter. I am particularly drawn to the work of the Metaphysical painter, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). His work included saturated colors and a variety of images and objects in illogical arrangements. In composing his enigmatic paintings, he altered the scale of the visual elements and placed unlikely objects together. These are strategies that I have incorporated in my work.

In his painting *Two Seated Nudes* (1926), he painted two women in robust, sculptural form. The figures are presented on a large scale and seem to fill the depicted interior. A smaller scaled column is placed behind the figure on the left. The palette reminds me of the color effect that can be achieved when using the negative tool in contemporary digital computer programs. The iridescent quality of the blues placed next to rust-colored oranges, and inconsistent application of shading techniques, make it difficult to tell where the light source is coming from. This incongruous presentation of images leads the viewer to a possible, non-traditional interpretation of the scene. This is an element that I wanted to achieve in my oil paintings.

In many of my oil paintings I incorporated a variety of textiles, from Oriental rugs to

bolts of fabric. I recently became aware of the artist, Tim Roeloff (1965-), whose textile design work has found its way to the major fashion runways. A collage and photo montage artist, his work is crowded with a variety of complex imagery. He has been creating fabrics using pictures of his native city, Berlin, Germany. This layering of photographic images of city scenes and architecture inspired some of my mixed media collage work.

Another artist of great importance and influence to me is Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). I was fortunate enough to see his work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510), at the Prado in Madrid, Spain. When first viewing this work there seemed to be too much to absorb, there were complex and disturbing stories being told on each of the three panels. Bosch used fantastical imagery, which seems to foretell Surrealist ideas of the early twentieth-century, such as placing sexually erotic figures with biblical images. In my oil paintings, I also attempt to combine components of different origins to tell a story of struggle and disparities.

In a recent visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, I observed two of Marc Chagall's (1887-1985) works, *I And The Village* (1911-1914) and *The Birthday* (1915). I have always appreciated the whimsical symbolism in his work. Through his combination of religious art and Russian folklore, he tells the stories of everyday life with a sense of fantasy. Like the profound visit I took to Italy, exploring my religious and ancestral roots, Chagall visited Palestine and explored his Jewish roots. During this visit he was touched and inspired by his spiritual homeland. Religious figures as well as characters from everyday life fill his paintings. Like many other artists who have influenced me, he too used a vibrant palette.

In *The Birthday*, he presents the viewer with a whimsical snapshot of a day in his life with his wife. On each side of the canvas there are fabrics with rich textures and colors. The figures float in the center of the canvas and meet at their lips. *I And The Village* also has a

dreamlike quality and he used multiple perspectives and unique viewpoints to show the life of a farmer in his environs. After spending a great deal of time thoughtfully observing these pieces, I recognized that these poetic compositional arrangements influenced my own work. The paintings were full of information using the power of symbolism and color.

## **On Canvas**

My first works on canvas were initially created as collages on paper. I chose a variety of Western and Eastern imagery to include in each of the collages. The oil paintings *Collaboration* (Appendix, 1), *Confliction* (Appendix, 2), and *Contradiction* (Appendix, 3) were all created from a single collage. I first made three copies of the collage and then cut each of the copies into pieces, and rearranged the pieces as plans for each of the paintings. I arranged the elements so that parts of each oil painting overlapped. I did not decide which way to orient the canvas until after I was finished with each of the paintings.

For the collage, I began with an image of the Buddha in the enlightenment posture. Here, Buddha is seated in the double lotus position with his right hand positioned facing downward with fingers extended towards the ground. His left hand has the palm positioned facing upwards. This posture signifies insight, purity of character, and religious understanding. In *Collaboration*, only the left hand of the Buddha is visible and is placed on the right margin of the canvas. Another prominent Eastern object is the lotus flower, which represents enlightenment as well as faithfulness in the Buddhist religion. The eight petals symbolize the eight-fold path of the Buddha. I have contrasted the monotone Buddha and lotus with a dragon fly, flower, and a vibrant Oriental rug background. The depicted spatial relationships are ambiguous and the rug can be read variously as background and foreground in this painting. I

purposely chose to paint the Buddha's hand and lotus in industrial grey tones, representing the modern West.

In *Confliction*, the canvas is crowded with a montage of layered images, representing the overload of activity in our daily lives. There is a contrast between the Eastern and Western cultures. I intended this painting to be a journey through time, from the time of Buddha to the modern age. The martini glass, in the upper right, encircles Buddha's hand and is also connected to the stem of the lotus. The shoe, on the left side of the painting, like the martini glass, is painted in its entirety. I cut the original collage so the Eastern elements were fragmented to imply that parts of these ancient cultures were trying to find a place in our Western society.

In *Contradiction* the main focus is the standing Buddha. This posture symbolizes the giving of blessings. His left arm is extended in front of his chest but it is blocked by the Chuck Taylor tennis shoe in the upper right-hand corner. The high heeled ladies' shoe anchors the lower left-hand corner. I chose these shoes as immediately recognizable images to the Western viewer. The Buddha is painted in tones of oranges and browns and there is a subtle transition to the industrial grey tones at the bottom of the figure. Where the grey begins, the Buddha transforms (at the waist) to a woman's form whose fingers are grasping pieces of the Buddha's cloak.

In *Design Temple* (Appendix, 4), I first made a paper collage plan and transferred the collage to canvas. This time I wanted to simplify the design in the collage. I purposely placed objects that were larger in scale on a less intricate background. I used a variety of painting styles and approaches so that I could closely replicate the collage. Some areas have very pronounced texture and other areas are more subdued. The geometric shapes are either flat or modeled, allowing the viewer to question which objects are in the foreground and which are in the

background. I also developed layers in the imagery and some of the initially painted areas were still visible, creating contrast. I used a more subdued palette for the ionic column in the upper right-hand corner, Buddha on the left, and the upside-down temple that Buddha is standing on.

### **Mixed Media Transfer**

In addition to painting I have also created mixed media work. As I developed this body of work, the style of my art changed drastically. I learned as much from my mistakes as I did with my successes in this new media. I found gesso transfer to be a harmonious blend between heat transfer and painting. It proved to be the answer I had been looking for in my work. I no longer gave more value to the pieces which took more time to create but instead valued them on their aesthetic success at completion.

*Roma in Blu* (Appendix, 5) is a photo transfer diptych on canvas. I began with a variety of photographs I took on a rainy day in Rome. The streets were flooded with water, which created a reflection on the roads and a unique atmosphere for my photographs. In the composition, I included sections of the ceilings from the Pantheon, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Vatican Museum. Using gesso, I transferred the images onto the canvas transposing images so that when the canvases were joined the road and trees did not logically meet. When I put the canvases together, I painted in some areas and reconnected some of the images. The palette for this work was a mixture of cobalt blue, tangerine orange, greys, and browns. The palette was inspired by Italian Renaissance paintings. After I completed the painting and transfers, I used shellac to heighten the color of the transfers.

In *Italianissimo* (Appendix, 6) I began with one photograph I took in Italy. This piece signaled a change of direction in my work. It is less complex and has a distinct portrait

orientation. I began with one image and divided it into sections, enlarging each. I collaged newspaper and tissue directly to the canvas, then transferred the picture to the canvas. I did not transfer all of the sections of each of the photographed buildings because I wanted parts of the newspaper and tissue to show through. I then used acrylic paint and painted the missing (non-transferred) sections of the buildings. My intent with this piece was to simply reconstruct a photograph I had taken in Italy using transfer and collage.

My mixed media pieces that were inspired by my trips to Italy prompted me to look closer to my own culture for imagery and ideas. In *Mirror Image* (Appendix, 7), I began with photographs of a mirrored sculpture and architecture in St. Petersburg, Florida. I manipulated and abstracted the images on the computer. Then, I transferred them to the canvas using gesso and layered the images with different colors of tissue paper to add texture and coloration. The colors I incorporated were inspired by the mirrored reflections in the original sculpture which were turquoise, light blues, golden browns, and soft lilacs. I did not add paint to this collage and did not use this as preparation for another work. In this piece, I was able to come full circle. I began making collages as plans for my paintings, now my collages have developed into works that stand alone.

## **Conclusion**

When I began my journey in the MIS-IAR Program, I did not have the confidence or insight that I have now. In my first painting classes, I was not sure which direction to take. As I continued to paint, I became more confident in my work but then I explored a new media. As I acquired more knowledge about mixed media and was introduced to new artists, my work began to take direction. I grew through my challenges and now I am able to combine collage, painting,

and transfer techniques. I have also found new ways to incorporate cultural influences in my work.

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## Appendix

### List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Collaboration*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 16", 2007.
- Figure 2. *Confliction*, Oil on Canvas, 16" x 20", 2007.
- Figure 3. *Contradiction*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 16", 2007.
- Figure 4. *Design Temple*, Oil on Canvas, 31" x 25", 2007.
- Figure 5. *Roma in Blu*, Mixed Media on Two Canvases, 48" x 24" x 1 ½" (each), 2009.
- Figure 6. *Italianissimo*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 18" x 14" x 1 ½", 2010.
- Figure 7. *Mirror Image*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 15" x 12", 2011.



Figure 1. *Collaboration*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 16", 2007.



Figure 2. *Conflict*, Oil on Canvas, 16" x 20", 2007.





Figure 3. *Contradiction*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 16", 2007.





Figure 4. *Design Temple*, Oil on Canvas, 31" x 25", 2007.



Figure 5. *Roma in Blu*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" x 24" x 1 ½" (each), 2009.





Figure 6. *Italianissimo*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 18" x 14" x 1 ½", 2010.

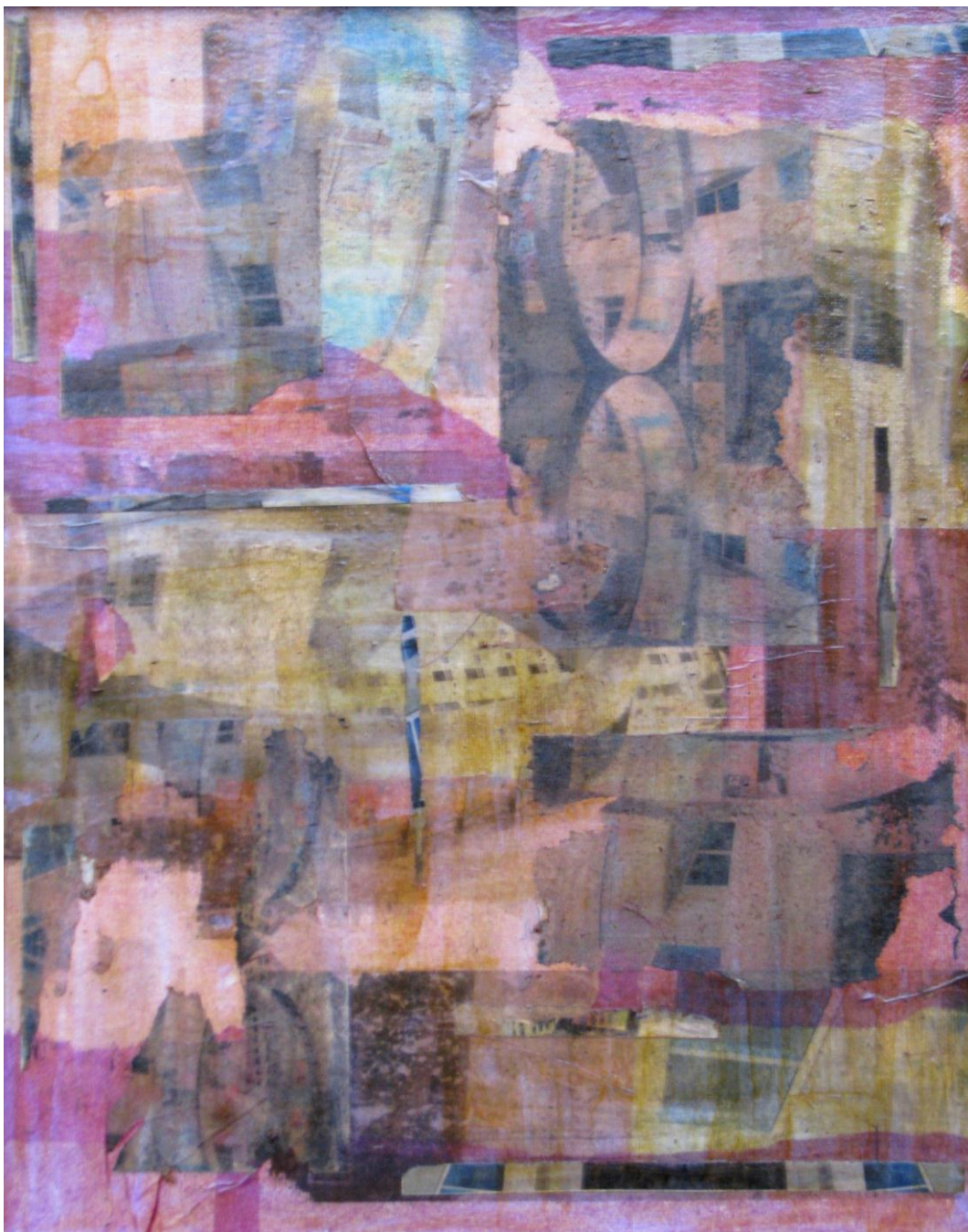


Figure 7. *Mirror Image*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 15" x 12", 2011.



## **LeeAnne Lawrynas Houston**

### **Education:**

- 2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia  
Studio Art (Painting and Mixed Media concentration)
- 1996 Bachelor of Liberal Studies in Studio Art  
Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia  
Cum Laude, Dean's List (three semesters)

### **Certification:**

- 1997-Present Art, NK-12

### **Professional Experience:**

- 2002-Present Art and History Teacher, Grymes Memorial School, Orange, VA
- 1997-2002 Art Teacher, Courthouse Road Elementary, Spotsylvania, VA

### **Honors:**

- 2010 Anne Ueltschi Challenge Grant for Professional Development,  
Grymes Memorial School, Orange, VA. Received grant to study drawing  
in Italy for three weeks during July 2010.
- 2007 Weezie Excellence in Teaching Chair, Grymes Memorial School,  
Orange, VA
- 2001 Teacher of the Year, Courthouse Road Elementary, Spotsylvania, VA
- 1996 Alpha Phi Sigma (Academic Honor Society)
- 1996 Alpha Sigma Lambda (Academic Honor Society)
- 1996 Kappa Delta Pi (Academic Honor Society)

### **Professional Membership:**

- 1999-2002 Virginia Education Association
- 1995-2005 National Art Education Association

### **Exhibitions:**

- 2011 *Journey and Destination*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in  
Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University,  
Richmond, VA at The Light Well, Orange, VA
- 1996 Senior Exhibit, DuPont Hall, Mary Washington College,  
Fredericksburg, VA